An anti-secularist manifesto

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GANDHI said he was secular. Yet he thought poorly of those who wanted to keep religion and politics separate. Those who believed in such separation, he said, understood neither religion nor politics.

This contradiction has its roots in two meanings of secularism current in contemporary India. The first meaning is known to every modern westerner; the second is an Indianism which has no place either in the Oxford English dictionary or in the Webster. According to the first, religious tolerance could come only from the devaluation of religion in public life and from the freeing of politics from religion. The less politics is contaminated by religion, this argument goes, the more secular or tolerant a State you will have. The word secular here is opposite of the word sacred.

According to its second meaning, secularism is not the opposite of the word sacred but that of ethnocentrism, xenophobia and fanaticism. One could be a good secularist by being equally disrespectful towards all religions or by being equally respectful towards them. And true secularism, the second meaning insists, must opt for respect. It is this non-modern meaning of secularism which anti-colonial India stressed, given its concerns with mass mobilisation and a broad consensus against the British rule.

The meaning recognises that even when a State is tolerant of religions, it need not lead to religious tolerance in a society. For, tolerance by the State cannot guarantee tolerance by the society. State tolerance may ensure, in the short run, the survival of a political community; in the long run the community must go beyond it. This meaning of secularism recognises covertly what we are now finding out painfully, namely, that the growth of vested interests in a secular public sphere is an insufficient basis for the long-term survival of a political community. Otherwise the Scots and the Welsh or, for that matter, the Sikhs and the Assamese would not be creating so many problems for their countries.

Previously, thanks to a number of fortunate circumstances, one could follow the logic of the second, more local, meaning of secularism in Indian politics while paying lip-service to the first. In recent years, the nature of the democratic process in India is forcing the political actors to choose between the two meanings.

First, the condition of the Indian State is such today that to advise the religious traditions to abide by values derived from the Indian State is likely to fall on deaf ears. Few will believe that Hinduism, Sikhism or Islam has any moral lesson to learn from the Indian State. For the same reason, the hope that the State can be an impartial arbiter among different religious communities in its present state appears a rather pallid one.

Second, in spite of the tremendous growth in the power of the State in India, sensitive political analysts as well as activists are in no doubt as to who or what will be abolished if the Indian nation-State today takes on the task of abolishing religious and cultural identities. The secularisation of the Indian State has gone far but there are limits to its capacity to secularise the society. (As I am primarily writing for the modern English-speaking gentry, I shall use the word 'secularism' in its proper English sense in the rest of this essay and forget the other secularism as an improper Indianism.)

The awareness of these issues has created problems for our concept of the State in India. Since about the seventeenth century, the modern ideology of the State has wanted the State to be secular by separating religion and politics. Since we first began to borrow the ideology in the third decade of the last century, it has also dominated the modern Indian consciousness. And we, too, have systematically tried to separate religion from politics. This, inspite of many like Gandhi trying to be 'secular' by bringing the right kind of religion and the right kind of politics together.

Now we suddenly confront the embarrassing fact that not only many Indians but a significant proportion of humankind have become suspicious of the western concept of secularism and become receptive to a non-secular concept of religious and cultural tolerance.

To understand the nature of this response we have to first recognise that modern nation-States, being by definition suspicious of the presence of culture in politics and trying to carve out a sphere of the State where only the values of statecraft will rule, works with the following ordering of the citizen (I also give examples from Indian public life).

nonbeliever in public and private (Jawaharlal Nehru, M.N. Roy)	*nonbeliever in public; believer in private (Vallabhbhai Patel, Indira Gandhi)*	*believer in public; non-believer in private (M.A. Jinnah, D.V. Savarkar)*	*believer in private and public (M.K. Gandhi)*

In other words, to the ideologues of the modern State system, the ideal political man is someone like Nehru or Roy. And they believe that, given the ineluctable laws of social progress, more and more citizens will enter the first category, to shed, as a first step, their religious beliefs in public and, then, as a second step, their beliefs in private.

This hierarchy of citizens, which persists in spite of the official and unofficial veneration of Gandhi as the father of the Indian nation, follows naturally from the modern ideology of secularism and provides the basis of the Indian State's claim to a monopoly on religious and ethnic tolerance. At the level of the person, such tolerance is definitionally the prerogative of one who has some western education and some exposure to the modern culture and the modern idiom of politics.

A Gandhian criticism of the approach could be three-fold. First, that it ignores the finer differences within traditions, while playing up such differences within the modern culture. It ignores that some forms of religion do lead to intolerance, other forms do not. Thus, while the approach draws a line between vulgar Marxism and non-vulgar Marxism and one between a vulgar West and a non-vulgar West, it refuses to draw a line between vulgar religion and non-vulgar religion or between tolerant and intolerant forms of culture.

Often, such secularism — I shall call it official secularism — goes farther. It compares the ideals of modernity with realities of religions and cultures. Thus, the ideals of modern politics are compared with the realities of the caste system (to show how bad the latter is) the way many zealous apologists of Hinduism compare the ideals of the caste system against the realities of hierarchical modern bureaucracy (to show how good the former is).

Second, official secularism tries to limit the democratic process by truncating the political personality of the citizen. While the personality of those within the fully secular, modern sector is well-represented in the democratic order, those outside the modern sector have only a part of their selves represented in politics. The other part they have to carefully keep outside the public sphere.

This, of course, means that the creative role which politics might play within a religious or cultural tradition, by playing up some subtraditions against the others or by reordering the hierarchy of subtraditions, is pre-empted. Instead of a dialogue between the public and the private within a person—and between politics and culture—the two spheres are rigidly separated and the latter is frozen in time. As a result, the religious and cultural traditions are forced to become, as the moderns invariably accuse them of being, status quoist. This does not of course keep religion out of politics; it only means politics enters it by a different route. We shall return to this point.

Third, official secularism fails to take into account the politics of cultures today. It sees the believer as a person with an inferior political consciousness and it celebrates the fact that we live more and more in a world where all faiths and cultures, except modernity, are in recession. Such secularism fails to sense that critical social consciousness, if it is not to become a reformist sect within modernity, must respect and build upon the faiths and the visions that have refused to adapt to the modern worldview.

I have spoken of the growing marginalisation of religions, cultures and visions. This may seem odd at a time when the secularists are obviously having a hard time. In Lebanon, Quebec, Scotland and Basque—and in Punjab, Assam, Sri Lanka and Sind in this subcontinent itself—ethnicity is challenging established modern nationalism; racism is on the rise in parts of the liberal first world; and the Church is ascendant in parts of the super-secular second. Even in societies not torn by ethnic passions, a new cultural pride and exclusivism are visible. American Blacks and Hispanics are examples.

Though often viewed as unique, the self-affirmation of parts of the Muslim world can also be seen as a part of this larger picture. The Muslims now find themselves at the centre of the world stage precisely because for long they were treated as the et-ceteras and and-so-forths of the world, whereas their ethnic self-affirmation is now backed by wealth and a new capacity to be a political nuisance.

This is not the world where one can talk glibly about the marginal-

isation of faith. Yet, the fact remains that the affirmation of religion in our times has gone hand in hand with the erosion of religions; exactly as the victory of the idea of the nation-State has coextended with a new cultural and psychological crisis in the modern nation-State system. The two crises however become one in the third world, and each society in our part of the world is faced with a dilemma.

On the one hand, the existing hierarchy of nations and the cultural domination of the modern West have created a new concern for, and defensiveness about, non-modern cultures. Modernity no longer looks like something in the distant future; it is now hegemonic globally.

This sensitivity to the power of modernity has been sharpened by the Orwellian awareness that one by one the main modern theories of man-made suffering and this-worldly liberation have themselves been coopted by new forces of oppression; these theories themselves now legitimise new forms of greed, violence and obscurantism. In such a world, the older objectivist interpretations of religious intolerance are bound to look incapable of handling the need for survival, with justice and dignity, of many cultural groups.

On the other hand, the pathologies of religion have become more obvious, due to the greater visibility of many forms of religion and due to the attempts to empower some of them. Even in the few third world polities where democratic participation has expanded, religion has ridden piggy-back on the newly politicised to enter visible politics and move centre stage. Democratisation and politicisation have not eliminated religion from politics; they have given xenophobic and anti-democratic forms of religion new power and salience. On the one hand is Coca Cola, on the other Ayatollah Khomeini. The choice, even in this terribly crude formulation, is painful.

II

The modern concept of secularism in India, I have already said, is borrowed from western history and it has a clear normative component: religion and ethnicity should be banished from the public sphere and an area should be marked out in politics where rationality, contractual social relationships, and *realpolitik* would reign. This sanitised sphere of politics may throw up rulers who are believers, but if it does do so, these leaders should be weak, secret or apologetic believers. It also follows from the same normative frame that in open societies, some citizens may chose their leaders on religious grounds or the leaders may exploit this weakness of the citizens, but both sides—the leaders and the led—should be embarrassed about this state of affairs and know the limits of their game.

Thus, a section of the Indian citizenry too feels more at home with a temple-going prime minister such as Indira Gandhi; the same way a section of the American public applauds a church-going president and sees him as potentially more honest or straight-forward. Yet, most vocal Hindu Indians will be shocked if Nepal is declared a natural ally of India because it is the world's only Hindu Kingdom.

There is a tacit theory behind this ambivalence to religion which cuts across nearly all State-centred ideologies in the Indian polity. It posits two secular trends in history: (1) the gradual erosion of faith and culture because of the growth of science, rationality and modern education and (2) the consequent expansion of an area of homogenous, universal, contractual, impersonal, public sphere where only values like self-interest, *realpolitik* and national security rule. The theory is an indirect plea to educate, guide and 'break in' the citizenry into this secular sphere, the sphere of *rajdharma*, with the help of a modern vanguard acting as a pace-setter in matters of social change.

The vanguard sets the pace by exercising its political choices in a rational and, hence, moral fashion from the point of view of the State. It may not be the Christian, the Hindu or the Islamic concept of morality, the theory goes, but it is morality all right; it is the morality of modern State-craft. In other words, the vanguard sets the pace by being a collection of exemplary persons who live with their fellow-humans without illusions, yet ethically, and by building their ethics not on myths or compassion but on scientific rationality, history and reasons of the State.

It should be admitted straightaway that, howsoever limited its concept of human nature, howsoever contemptuous its attitude to the ethnic peripheries reportedly waiting to be conscientised out of their illusions, such secularism has served the Indian citizenry reasonably well for long periods of time, especially so in the early years after Independence under the easy, benign modernist, Jawaharlal Nehru.

At the time, political mobilisation, in spite of the existence of a powerful nationalist movement since the twenties, was still at a manageably low level. The Indian power elite was choosy about whom it admitted to the highest levels of the government, and the memory of what could be done in the name of religion in public life was fresh in the minds of the citizens.

There was a wide consensus that an area of sanity had to be maintained in the polity, community-based nepotism had to be contained, confidence had to be created in the new political institutions and in the impartiality of the peace-keeping forces. Above all, there was a consensus which acknowledged — against the beliefs of the various forms of liberal, Fabian and Marxist ideologies which informed the ruling ideology of the Indian State — that Hindu and Islamic exclusivism and zealotry were the strongest among the urban middle classes, not among the so-called peripheries of the country, and therefore the main battle against religious and ethnic conflicts had to be fought among the middle classes which dominated the Indian political consciousness. The secularisation of Indian politics, so far as it involved mainly the middle classes, did hold such conflicts in check.

That consensus and that strategy have gone as far as they could have.

They have now not only begun to break down but to work against many forms of ethnic tolerance. First, political participation has grown enormously, thanks to the eight general and innumerable local elections and thanks to the way politics has entered virtually every sphere of Indian life. No longer is it possible to screen those entering politics for their commitment to modern secular ethics. This is another way of saying that democratisation itself has set limits on the secularisation of Indian politics. The new entrants, coming from what was, until recently, part of the ethnic 'backwaters' of India, have given Indian democracy its power and resilience?

Second, partly negating the first process, the new entrants carrying their religion or ethnicity into their politics have self-consciously begun to shed their ethnic consciousness while retaining their ethnic links. These links they use in a secular fashion for electoral, especially factional ends. That is, they end up by joining the third category of political participants (exemplified by persons like Jinnah and Savarkar) rather than the first or the second (exemplified by Nehru and Indira Gandhi respectively). Instead of the religious use of politics, they make political use of religion, turining it into an instrument of political mobilisa tion within a psephocratic model —a model in which elections and elected 'kings' dominate the system.

Thus religion, as a repository or expression of cultural values, no longer remains available for checking the pure politics of public life, often seen by the newly politicised as an area where only the laws of the jungle apply. All this is another way of saying that there is now a peculiar double-bind in Indian politics: the ills of religion have found political expression but the strengths of it have not been available for checking corruption and violence in public life.

Third, self-doubts have arisen in many modern Indians because the older concept of secularism has been losing its shine since the late sixties in exactly those countries which were said to be way ahead of India on the road to secularisation and nation-building. The positivist, science-centred ideologies of nationality and the conservative and radical theories of progress have come under attack there as the new opiates of the masses which allow the ruling classes to hand over the State to the technocrats and to the controllers of mass media.

After rejecting and very nearly defeating religion as a false consciousness in society after society in the first and second worlds, the social critics and activists there have found that the secular State has begun to claim — along with its new priestly classes like the scientists, the bureaucrats and the development experts — exactly the same blind faith from its followers as the church once did. It has begun to equip itself with the technological means to be omniscient, omnipotent and omnipresent, God itself. In the north that process is called scientific advancement, in the south development.

All these experiences have been unkind to the modern secularists in India. Recently, they have been subjected to further stress because, as a part of secularisation itself, the private lives of politicians have become public property. Jawaharlal Nehru, it now turns out, was a votary of astrology and a sneaking Hindu in personal life; Subhas Chandra Bose was a Gita-devouring crypto-sannyasi; and by now it is well-known that Indira Gandhi, that open worshipper of the secular Indian nation-State, did not like to miss a *havan* or pilgrimage, given a half chance.

Even the implicit, third model of secularism used by the *bete noire* of Indian secularists, Mohammed Ali Jinnah, is in crisis today. Most well-known Indian secularists of the recent decades, by their personal faith, would have put Jinnah to shame, who in private life was a nonbeliever. But Jinnah made a rather profitable mix of private agnosticism and public religiosity, which of course was the exact reverse of the dominant mode of linking religion to politics in Indian nationalism: private faith and public nonbelief. Jinnah's goal was to create a political culture in Pakistan which ultimately, he hoped, would gradually delink Islam from the Pakistani State, confine it to private life, and then move towards a secular modern State where a highly westernised, lapsed Muslim like him would not be a misfit.

Jinnah's main fear, the fear which made him leave the Congress camp, was that the Gandhian movement would create a culture of politics in which, under the guise of Gandhian 'secularism', a Hindu culture would discomfit both the Indian secularist and the Indian Muslim. Being a westernised ethnic, Jinnah could not differentiate between a Hindu zealot and a spokesman of the peripheral Hindus. He had no clue as to why a zealot like D.V. Savarkar should be more hostile to Gandhi than to a modernist like Nehru.

However, if Jinnah had been alive, he would have been happy to see that his political style, even though in crisis because it has been taken over by the zealots in his 'homeland', survives in other parts of the subcontinent. In India often fully secular, even anti-religious, Muslim politicians get access to power in the name of their Muslim origins which they themselves see in purely instrumental terms. In Pakistan and Bangladesh, the Zulfikar Ali Bhuttos and the Zia-ur-Rahmans, who are non-believers or weak believers themselves, have constantly tried politically to encash the appeal of Islam.

The experience of Islam in this respect has been the experience of every religion of the subcontinent. It is the experience of being often reduced to the status of a handmaiden of politics, subservient to the needs of a nation-State and the class interests of the zealot and the westernised secularist, both of whom hold the vast majority of the people of their own religion in contempt; one for their lack of zealotry; the other for their incomplete westernisation.

In sum, formal, western-style secularisation has shown an incapacity to keep pace with politicisation in this part of the world, and it shows no sign of being able to do so in the future. As with countries long held up as models for India for their

developmental performance (at different times Britain, the United States, Soviet Russia, Maoist China and even Shah's Iran), in this subcontinent, too, ethnicity is refusing oblige and sing its swan song. Yet, as I have already said, the survival of ethnicity has not strengthened ethnicity or religious traditions; it has only allowed the pathologies of the latter to find political expression.

We thus come to the 'method' of a small minority of those working for religious or ethnic tolerance in India, though the method paradoxically is based on the faith and the culture of the majority of Indians. The method is implied in the unofficial Indian use of the word 'secularism'; it is explicit in the Gandhian and proto-Gandhian theories of inter-religious harmony.

Those loyal to the modern idea of the nation-State accept the idiom of secularism, and try to hitch ethnicity to politics in a more or less pragmatic way. They try to create a social basis for secularism by linking it to the reward system of the State, thus creating a vested interest in at least the secular political style. Those sympathetic to the Gandhian vision — to the utter embarrassment of the modern Indian State with its new-found global power ambitions and its fear of the growing political self-affirmation of the non-modern Indians — try to shift the emphasis from actors to texts, and from outer to inner incentives, so as to reaffirm 'true' religion and 'true' culture which they see as definitionally tolerant of the other religions and cultures.

Such a vision has many features. The most crucial of them is the recognition that the clash between modernity and religious traditions in the third world elicits from each culture four political responses to ethnicity. The responses can be called half ideal-types, half mythic structures.

The first of the four, which does not really fit in with the other three, is the ethnic construction of the *western man* whose personality is viewed as the cause of the West's success and the non-West's failure. This western man is a shadow category or a dummy. Not merely because he is often physically absent in the third world but also because the way the non-West construes him is not how he sees himself. Nor even the way he has 'really' existed in history. However, the category is not unreal either; millions of human beings have lived by that image and millions have suffered because of the existence of that image.

Sometimes the western man is construed by a non-western culture as an 'other'—to criticise or correct the allegedly faulty personality types available in the culture. The shadowy western man then becomes a critique of the indigenous personality as well as a projection of the ego-ideal of some sections of the indigenous population. If the sections are powerful, they may even manage to set up this ego ideal as the ideal of the entire society. It then begins to represent a new eupsychia (to use Abraham Maslow's concept of an utopian concept of personality) in opposition to the traditional eupsychias surviving in the society.

Along with this image of the western-man-as-the-ideal - political-man goes a managerial attitude to ethnic and religious groupings, often expressed in the belief that successful nation-building involves hard decisions relating to ethnic minorities, decisions not based on the chauvinism of the majority, but on inspired, hard-headed statecraft.

What is in store for the minorities in the model is not very different from what is generally in store for them in a theocratic State. Only, instead of facing the prospect of being Islamised under, say, an Islamic theocracy, the minorities face the prospect of being westernised in a western nation-State. However, in the second case, the situation is morally 'redeemed' by the fact that what is in store for the ethnic minorities in the long run is no different from what is in store for the ethnic majority in the long run. Both become objects of social engineering and both face cultural extinction.

The second category of response is that of the *westernised native*, the ethnic who has internalised and approximated the western man (though his syncretism may include sometimes a touch of defiance, too). From a Rammohun Roy (1772-1833) who took a Brahmin cook with him to England after life-long defiance of Hindu caste codes, to a Jawaharlal Nehru (1889-1964) who in his weaker moments gave in to astrologers and tantriks of all hues, a long and colourful list of individuals provide clues to the inner contradictions of the westernised native. But it also happens to be a list of men who have fought for the western secular ideals in this part of the world and turned against their own cultural self, partly to identify with their western tormentors.

Corresponding to the personality type is a reconstructed history which locates in the past persons who reportedly represented the same ideals. Thus, modern India has rediscovered Ashoka from the third century BC and Akbar from the sixteenth-century as proper 'secular' rulers and it has reinterpreted traditional texts (such as the once dealing with the different *dharmas* of the king and the brahman, or the ones dealing with the morality of statecraft) to legitimise the western ideals of secular statecraft.

The westernised native may differ politically from the western man, he may even be the western man's political antagonist, but his ultimate aim is to westernise — he prefers to say 'modernise' or 'universalise' — his own culture. He takes the ideal of one world seriously and he believes in a theory of progress in which progress stands for uniformisation according to the model of the European nineteenth century visions of a desirable society. He believes that the western nations — or, if the westernised native happens to be orthodox socialist or positivist Marxist, the socialist West — are more advanced culturally; that the peripheries of the world will slowly and painfully have to traverse the same path of progress.

The two main obstacles to this he sees as the backward, religious masses, unexposed to modern scientific rationality, and their false leadership, ever willing to take

advantage of irrational, superstitious faiths. To fight the two obstacles he invokes the image of the western man and constantly compares it with the realities of the non-western cultures.

Thirdly, there is the *zealot* — the aggressive Hindu, Muslim or Sikh who, reacting to and yet internalising the humiliation inflicted on all faiths by a triumphant anti-faith called western modernity, has accepted the modern attitude to all faiths including his own. He is the one the westernised native fears the most as the fanatic who might mobilise the otherwise-unmobilisable masses suffering from an acute case of false consciousness (even though such zealots mostly operate from urban bases and appeal to the semi-modern). If such a zealot is a Muslim or a Sikh we call him a fundamentalist, if he is a Hindu we call him a revivalist or a Hindu nationalist.

Strangely enough, the zealot only *uses* the traditional religious or ethnic boundaries as units of mobilisation, means of coalition building and settling scores. To him the faith of the ordinary Hindu, Muslim or Sikh is an embarrassment. The latter does not seem to show the right kind of respect to the purity of his own faith; he has no sense of unity; his commitment to *realpolitik* is partial; and he lacks the martial spirit shown by the zealot himself.

In this respect, the Hindu revivalist or Muslim fundamentalist is often only a variation on the secular political man of post-Enlightenment Europe and his ethnicity is skin-deep and reactive. He, too, has identified with the aggressors; he, too, has turned against his cultural self. Ultimately, the zealot's is more a political than a civilisational self-affirmation. To the zealot the idea of his own religion or culture is appealing, not the actuality of it. (That is why his strong commitment to the classical version of his religion and culture.)

He is one who has internalised the 'defeat' of his religion or culture in the hands of the modern world and he is the one who believes that that defeat can be avenged only when the peripheral faiths or ethnicities have internalised the technology of victory of the western man and decided to fight under the flag of their own faiths. The zealot hates the westernised ethnic as one who has sold himself to the western man but his hatred for the peripheral ethnic is deeper. For he shares with the westernised ethnic the reference point called the western man.

The Referent		The Western Man (dummy variable)
The modern secular-rationalist	Westernised Hindu	Westernised Muslim
The semi-modern zealot	Hindu revivalist	Muslim fundamentalist
The nonmodern ethnic	Peripheral or everyday Hindu	Peripheral or everyday Muslim

Finally, there are the numerically preponderant *peripheral believers* (who are peripheral only because the zealots and the secularists have declared them so). These believers who have learnt to fight with, as also to survive, the zealots of the other faiths as well as their own. The modern secularist and the crypto-modern zealot know of the battles for survival against the zealots of other faiths, not of the other battle against the zealots of one's own. Neither the secularist nor the zealot has the sensitivity to stand witness to this other battle for survival. Neither has the time to remember the experience of neighbourliness and co-survival which characterises the relationships among the peripheral believers of different faiths.

The non-modern, peripheral ethnic has a longer and deeper memory. And it is to him and his ideology that Gandhi turned to give a political basis to his concept of religious and ethnic tolerance. A number of scholars, most recently T.K. Mahadevan and Agehananda Bharati, have written about Gandhi's poor knowledge of textual Hinduism. An impartial scholar of classical Hinduism cannot but agree with them. Surely Gandhi had little patience with the greater Sanskritic culture. He sometimes paid lip service to it but there could be little doubt that his primary allegiance was to the folk theologies of Hinduism and Islam.

His family belonged to the Pranami sect, a sect deeply influenced by Islam and he belonged to a region where Muslim communities were in turn deeply influenced by Hindu folk theology. He had reason to be confident that religions not merely divided but also united human aggregates.

Once you have classified the ethnic personality in politics (see summary in chart), it becomes obvious that in societies like India, there are two affinities and three enmities in any situation involving two religious communities. The overt affinity is between the westernised believers of the two communities. The westernised Hindu and the westernised Muslim, for instance, can spend days discussing their commonness, especially how the two of them are different from the common run of Hindus and Muslims who are willing to kill each other for the sake of their faiths, and how in the distant future, they, the barbarians, might be pursuaded to shed their faith, modernise and then live happily ever after. The covert affinity is between the peripheral Hindus and peripheral Muslims, much less accessible to the modern Indian and to modern scholarship.

The overt hostility is that between the Hindu and the Muslim zealots who hate each other but understand each other's motivations perfectly. The less overt one is the hostility of the westernised ethnic towards the peripherals of his own as well as other faiths whom the westernised ethnic sees as passive or prospective zealots. The covert hostility is that of the zealot whose hatred for the everyday practitioner of his own faith is total.

I have more or less completed my analysis. All that remains to be done

is briefly to mention some features of the peripheral majority, their folk religions and folk theologies, and the politics of tolerance implicit in them. This tolerance bypasses the three enmities mentioned above and has the capacity to survive and even enrich the process of democratic participation, unlike the tolerance of the modernised sector which proves fragile in a situation of expanding participation.

First, the peripheral believers in a traditional society face a world-view which seeks to pre-empt and frequently deny the existence of their traditional ideology of tolerance. Thus, modern India talks of Ashoka and Akbar without admitting that they did not build a tolerant State in the sense in which a Lenin or a Jawaharlal Nehru would have wanted them to; they built their tolerance on the tenets of Buddhism and Islam.

Likewise, the chieftains of the Hindu zealots like to refer to the profound truth that India is tolerant because it is Hindu. But their claim has a dishonest ring about it, for they violently disagree when someone parodies them and says that Akbar was tolerant because he was Muslim or Ashoka was great because he was a Buddhist first and a king second.

All Gandhi did as a *sanatani* or traditional Hindu was to take both these positions seriously — the one which says that India is secular because it is Hindu and the one which says Akbar was tolerant because he was a Muslim — and to openly admit the religious basis of ethnic tolerance in India. He did the same thing with Christianity and tried to do so haphazardly with Sikhism and Judaism, too.

Instead of committing himself to the hopeless task of banishing religion from politics while expanding democratic participation, he dared seek a politics which would be infused with the right kind of religion and be tolerant. That is why a Hindu zealot found him a serious opposition and killed him. As I have already said, Hindu zealotry has never found the modernist a serious enemy; it has found in him only an effete, self-hating Hindu.

Secondly, Gandhi recognised that India's most effective preachers of inter-communal harmony in the past have mostly been either pre-modern, non-modern or anti-modern. Men like Nehru, he felt, were only a partial or apparent exception to this rule. Sensing the critique of modernity implied in this recognition, the embarrassed modernists have tried to integrate Gandhi in their framework by conceptualising Hinduism and Islam as two cultures which could be freed from their religious moorings and fitted into a composite whole called the Indian culture to which all right-thinking Indians should be allegiant.

Unfortunately, religions are not machine-parts and politicians and scholars make bad cultural machinists. The best of Hinduism and the best of Islam may go together as the titles of two paperback books of readings in the same series, but will hardly invoke two living religious traditions trying to cope with each other or with real-life issues.

Those outside the modern sector in India sense this. They are conscious of the existence of two religions called Hinduism and Islam as well as of the Hindu construction of Islam and the Muslim construction of Hinduism. It is on the basis of such constructions — and by this I certainly mean something more than stereotypes — that they operate in everyday life. At this plane the 'languages' of Hinduism and Islam — and for that matter all major religions and ethnic traditions in India — have now interlocking and/or common grammars. These grammars survive, in spite of the efforts of learned scholars to read them as folk theologies — as inferior, peripheral versions of Hinduism and Islam. They survive as a mode of mutuality and a major source of Indian creativity.

Creativity, after all, presumes a certain marginality and, in the matter of culture, a certain dialectic between the classical and the folk. It has to transcend the classicist — and elite — formulation that classicism is the centre of the culture, to protect the classicism itself from becoming a two-dimensional frozen instance of a culture museumised and commoditified.

Let us consider for a moment what many consider to be the finest expression of Indian creativity: north Indian classical music. Is it Hindu? Is it Muslim? Is it secular? One need not to do a very imaginative empirical work on Indian creative musicians — though some such works are available — to pierce through their derived sloganeering about secularism and to find out that the Muslim musicians think north Indian classical music to be mainly Muslim, the Hindu musicians think it to be mainly Hindu.

This could be read as a source of possible conflict; it could be read as the possible source of the cultural power of such music. One of the major symbols of the north Indian classical tradition in this century, Allauddin Khan, when he wanted to honour his wife Madina Begum by composing a new *raga* in her name, could not apparently find anything less Vaishnava than *madanmanjari*.

Modern secularism fails to see the religious sources of such creativity and tolerance of other faiths. It sees the refusal of Bade Ghulam Ali to sing paeans to Pakistan or to its founder during his brief stay in that country as an expression of his secularism. Traditional theories of ethnic tolerance see it as an expression of *his* Islam or of a truer Islam. They recognise that song texts in north Indian classical music have a tradition behind them and they bear a direct relationship with an artist's or a *gharana's* mode of creativity. That tradition has a direct religious meaning — simultaneously Hindu and Islamic. It cannot be artificially given a religious meaning exclusively identified with one faith. Nor can it be ever fully secularised.

Similarly with architecture. P.N. Oak has worked for years on a 'Hindu' history of the Taj Mahal. Now carbon dating seems to be lending partial support to this theory. Trying pathetically to be a

proper modern historian, Oak never owns up the psychological insight he is tacitly articulating: the Taj Mahal does seem sanctified to a religious Hindu, and deeply Islamic to the believing Muslim. There lies the Indian meaning of its grandeur as well as appeal. Disconnect Taj from either of the two traditions, and it becomes a monument purely for the non-Indian tourists and orientalists. Oak's history, thus, is not only irrelevant to the majority of Hindus; it is anti-Hindu.

What is true of the zealot's approach to culture is also true of the westernised native's attitude to culture. The modern secularist and the modern Hindu try to preserve the Taj as a monument for tourists and build an oil refinery next to it. Their modernity is linked to the Taj through the market and through sulphuric acid. The traditional concept of ethnic tolerance, concerned, powerless and at bay, can only pray at the mosque hoping that the modern world will pass it by.

Both examples provide clues to an alternative awareness of the culture of India. This awareness admits that at one plane Hinduism has become a part of Indian Islam and Islam a part of Hinduism — that the ordinary Indian Muslim knows — even if being part of a minority he finds it more difficult to admit — that Indian Islam, one of the most creative in the world, owes its creativity to its encounter with the other faith of India, exactly the way the everyday Hindu knows that the creativity of Hinduism has been sharpened over the centuries by its encounters with other faiths, mainly Islam, Buddhism, Christianity and Sikhism.

True that the uprooted or marginalised Muslim, urbanised and frequently lumpenised, often looks to the Middle East for salvation. And so does sometimes the Mullah trying desperately to protect his place among followers whose peripheral Islam does not often grant him the centrality he seeks. But can one not make a strong case that such defensiveness follows not so much from his faith as from his frustration and insecurity in his immediate political environs?

The Gandhian response to this question is clear. If the rules governing the treatment of *mlechchas* and *vidharmis* in Manu, Yajnavalkya and Kautilya do not handicap the Hindu in a democratic order, because he has other *shastras* and traditions to fall back upon, the concept of *dar'ul Islam* also should not make the Muslim a congenital misfit in a plural society. There are alternative traditions in Islam, too.

I find in the *Indian Express* of January 29, 1983, a brief biographical note written by a journalist which, in an abbreviated form and with minor editing, I want to reproduce for the scholarly secularist as my last word on the inner capacities of faiths in the matter of ethnic tolerance.

> On January 9, the house of a young Telegu poet in the old city of Hyderabad was raided by a band of communalists. They stabbed him, his wife and his child. The woman died immediately, the poet on the way to the hospital. The orphaned boy is in hospital, dangling between life and death. Communal frenzy does not know what it claims. They...did not know that they were destroying a promising Telugu poet, who was writing the 17th version of ..Ramayana.
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> ...the poet was born on January 2, 1946 at Kalwakurty, a big tehsil village in Mahboobnagar district of the Telengana region. His mother was a teacher in the village school. He too followed in her footsteps. 'Teaching is the noblest profession', he used to say. But he was not content being a matric-passed trained basic teacher. His ambition was to become a *vidwaan* of Samskrit. But Kashi Vidyapeeth rejected him. ...Then he met a scholar, Pandit Gunday Rao Harkarey, who taught him the secret of learning a language by the self-taught method... Thus, studying privately, he obtained Master's degrees in three...languages — Samskrit, Telugu and Hindi. He had started composing small poems in Telugu when he was just 12 years old. After his marriage, he produced four volumes of *kaavyas* and three volumes of *khanda kaavyas*. After the publication of 'Vijaya Bheri', 'Asru Dharu' and 'Bharati', he was hailed as the most significant poet since Umar Ali Shah. Presenting him at a Telugu mushaira, Viswanatha Satyanarayana...said 'This is a gathering of poets in their 70s. This young poet being only 25 should not have been here. But if he is here, it is because he already was 50 when he was born'. Such a rich tribute...is all the more significant because the poet was from Telengana and the literary elite of the Godawari district dismiss Telengana's 'ulligaddi, badnikai' Telugu with disdain... the unspoilt villager in the poet had survived despite the many degrees he obtained. ...
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> The young poet now began studying all the versions of Ramayana — Valmiki, Ranganatha, Bhaskara, Kambha, Molla, Viswanatha, Kalpa Vruksha and Tulsi. 'I have discovered rational and logical flaws in Valmiki in his description of places and situation', he said, 'I want to write my version of Ramayana. ...I want to name it "Yaseen Ramayana". If will be my gift to posterity'. That is what Ghulaam Yaseen, the teacher and the poet, was busy doing when fanaticism struck its deathly blow. ...And the Ramayana which Ghulaam Yaseen wanted to leave behind him...remains unfinished.

What was Ghulaam Yaseen? A secular Muslim who did not know his real vocation? A good man with a Muslim name who could be *used* by dedicated social reformers or by the Indian State to establish bridges between faiths? A crypto-Hindu killed by the Hindus by mistake? Or a true Muslim who could express his religious sensitivities through other people's faiths? Or an Indian whose assassination has simultaneously impoverished Hinduism, Islam and Indianness?

Gandhi's response to these questions, I am sure, would have been unambiguous. What about ours?

III

Only one thing remains to be discussed now. And the case of poet Ghulaam Yaseen brings us back to it with a vengeance: riots.

From the growing volume of data on religious violence in India it is now fairly obvious that riots have only indirect links with traditions or faith. Though the modern Indian loves to see all riots as products of insufficient modernisation, a very large majority of all riots takes place in urban and semi-urban India where only one-fifth of Indians live. Within urban India in turn, riots co-vary significantly with industrialisation, uprooting, breakdown of traditional social ties and habitats.

Likewise, the frequency of riots go down as we go back into recorded history. Even if one accepts the favourite argument of Indian modernists that all positive interpretations of the Indian past are imperfect history, it is difficult to believe that earlier centuries could match the going rate of more than one riot a day in India. Nor can the modernists adequately explain the five-fold increase in the number of riots in the last three decades.

One is almost forced to admit that communal riots in India have a modern connection. This connection is not surprising. While religious violence was certainly not unknown in pre-modern or non-modern India, the kind of 'rational', 'managerial', intercommunal violence we often witness nowadays can only be a byproduct of secularisation and modernisation. Only a secular, scientific concept of another human aggregate or individual — only total objectification — can sanction the cold-bloodedness and organisation which have come to characterise many of the riots in recent times.

True, there has always been an element of organisation in riots. Religious violence is rarely, if ever, a spontaneous expression of faith or of the desire for martyrdom. True, during this century, this element of organisation has generally been provided by the zealots and by the political formations controlled by the zealots. This is but natural. Only the semi-modern zealots, trying to organise their cobelievers as a political community — as an instrument of heroic, death-denying transcendence — can have the motivation and the ideology to provide the organisational base for riots.

For that very reason, however, there is a built-in check in the situation. Take for instance the self-conscious Hindu zealot who, embarrassed by his own un-Hindu zealotry, always defensively asserts that Hinduism is more tolerant than other faiths, while admiring, deeper down, the 'intolerance' of the other faiths. He also recognises that this tolerant spirit of Hinduism is based on the unorganised, polycentric nature of the faith. The Hindu who is tolerant is not a zealot; he does not even talk of his tolerance. The zealot who talks of Hindu tolerance is not tolerant, for he is not the Hindu who is tolerant.

This poses a dilemma for the zealot. On the one hand he hates the run-of-the-mill Hindus for what they are; on the other, the more he demonstrates his zealotry, the more isolated he gets from the common run of Hindus. (The modernists who seek the sources of zealotry in the everyday Hindu forget that the most ardent champions of Hinduism have enjoyed the electoral support of a very small proportion of the Hindus, that too in semi-modern, urban India). In other words, the zealot's success is self-limiting, even though it can be fearsome in the short run.

No such limit works when the westernised Hindu uses religion in politics. The zealot as a semi-westernised, marginal Hindu can only look wistfully at the fully westernised, modern Hindu and his command of modern statecraft, organisations and mass media. The zealot has to look even more wistfully at the support the peripheral Hindu has given till now to his westernised brothers and denied the zallot, even though the zealot claims to fight for the Hindu cause and the westernised Hindu does not. As if the peripherals knew that the westernised Hindu was engaged in the hopeless task of abolishing Hinduism, whereas the zealot was engaged in the more attainable and therefore dangerous task of altering the content of Hinduism.

It is the westernised Hindu's command over modern statecraft, combined with his efforts to protect his earlier hegemony in competitive mass politics, and his desacralised secularism which has created a volatile situation in the country today. The modern, secular, westernised Hindu, like his counterparts among the Sinhalese Buddhists in Sri Lanka and the Punjabi Muslims in Pakistan, is now constantly pushed towards the political use of religion.

He is pushed because he has two natural assets: (1) better access to the mass media, as compared to that of the zealot and the peripheral Hindu, and (2) greater ability to use dispassionately the passions of faith of the zealot and the peripheral Hindu. Both assets give him advantages which are not available either to the zealot or to the peripheral believer.

In other words, when the secular modernists get involved in the game of organised religious or ethnic violence to fight off political defeat, they play the game not as fanatics trying to advance the cause of their own community or faith but as politicians who must take advantage of human passions to mobilise the political, especially electoral, support of the numerically preponderant 'passive' believers. And as the role of modern communication and modern organisations expand in politics, the temptation as well as capacity of the secular modernists to organise religious or ethnic violence in a fully secular and scientific manner increases.

It is the unfolding of this process which we are witnessing in India today. In earlier riots, organisation by the zealot and political cost-calculation by everyone used to play an important but small role. A

larger role was played by religious fanaticism, stereotypes and prejudices. Over the years the role of organisation and rational cost-calculations have expanded enormously. During the 1980s, in Bhiwandi, Delhi and Ahmedabad we have seen fully planned and expertly executed pogroms run by hired psychopaths and lumpen proletariat who not only start and sustain mob violence but do so without much of fanaticism, stereotyping and prejudice.

It will not be an exaggeration to say that this new breed of riots depends more on rationality, objectivity and self-interest — on hard materialism, cost-benefit analysis and greed — than on religious fanaticism or stereotypes. Fanaticism and stereotypy come in, but in a diluted form, to provide the morally troubled middle-classes with post facto rationalisation of what the local toughs, the political machines, and the lumpen mobs do.

In matters of riot, rationality is now used to generate violence — to rob, to burn, to kill — while the passions are used to sustain the idea of a moral world where the robbery, the arson and the murder are not arbitrary acts of God but are deserved punishments for the acts of some members of the victims' community. In this sense, we are now witnesses to primarily secular riots, justified later on in non-secular terms for the benefit of the victims and the instruments of violence.

No other riot of recent times illustrates this point better than the carnage of Sikhs in Delhi in November 1984. (I shall try not to glorify the event by calling it a riot, for it was clearly a one-way affair. However, such organised, religious 'wars' can include arrangements with politicians of other faiths to give the violence the look of a riot, as in Hyderabad in 1984).

First a contextual fact. The Sikhs had been traditionally seen by the Hindus as well as by the Sikhs themselves not as an alien community but as part of the Hindu social order. After all, the principle of endogamy was never observed in the case of Hindu-Sikh relations and the traditional social ties which bound the two communities were deep. That is, by conventional criteria, the Sikhs were not a minority nor did they see themselves as such. It took a long period of political skull-duggery and the experience of the 1984 riots to turn them into a distinct minority.

Because of this background, Hindu or Sikh zealotry, too, has never found it possible, till recently, to arouse in Hindu-Sikh conflicts the fanaticism which has been associated with the Hindu-Muslim conflicts in this century. It was not that easy during the days of violence in November to induce the Hindu neighbours to take part in the pogrom against the Sikhs. At best they could be turned into passive observers who later on, if guilty about their passivity, could be given ready-made packaged 'reasons' through the government-controlled media as to why the Sikhs needed to learn a lesson.

Thus, except for a few localities, the Hindu neighbours tried to help Sikh families to escape the killers, sometimes at great risk to their own security. Communities with a shared past did even better. For instance, many erstwhile refugee colonies, set up in the late forties by the victims of the partition riots, formed joint Hindu-Sikh defence committees and protected their Sikh members successfully. The exceptions were localities where there were no neighbourly ties either because the communities were new settlements or because they were dominated by pseudo-communities of uprooted, economically-deprived isolates and criminals.

Second, organisations like the RSS, which generally take a lead in organising violence against minorities, also got into the act this time. However, according to the Sikhs themselves, these zealots acted as small-time activists, not as the kingpins of the pogrom. In a majority of cases, the attackers came from outside the community, in organised groups and in busloads. Often they came from the nearby State of Haryana. As if they were being unloaded against the poorer, less defended Sikh communities, the extermination of which outside the psychological boundaries of middle-class city life would not disturb the conscience of the average middle-class citizen.

The organisers knew that many middle-class Hindus would find it easier restrospectively to justify the pogrom if the major killings did not take place before their own eyes or before the eyes of their families, and if the killings did not indicate a total breakdown of the moral order. Attacks against those living at the geographical and psychological peripheries of Delhi's civic life ensured such a 'numbing' of the citizens' moral self.

The attackers on their part were motivated not so much by any anger or sorrow on the assassination of Indira Gandhi, usually given as the reason for the carnage, but mainly by the prospect of loot. In many cases, they joked and laughed when participating in the arson, rape and the killings. From the available accounts of the victims, even the police, the docile bureaucrats and the Congress-I activists who took part in the pogrom did so not as a spontaneous revenge for Mrs Gandhi's assassination but as a part of a well-oiled machine.

This is best evidenced by the way in which the police got rid of all evidences of the carnage in an organised, calculated fashion. The other clue is the way rumours were deliberately spread in the city (such as the one about the city's drinking water being poisoned by the Sikhs) to provoke the citizenry, to further numb its moral sense, and to buy its passivity.

Third, before, during and after the pogrom, a propaganda barrage against the Sikhs was kept up by the monopoly media, represented by the radio, the television and the servitor press. This propaganda dubbed as seditious even things which previously had looked innocuous or minor such as the alleged anti-national demands of the Anandpur Sahib Resolution.

The Resolution had been passed twelve years ago in the presence of

Congress-I stalwarts; it was later on blessed by persons like Jayaprakash Narayan, and considered harmless enough by Mrs Gandhi for her to have supported and financed Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale even after he had become a strong votary of the Resolution. Evidently, aware that the minorities were gradually abandoning the Congress-I, the ruling party was keen to win over a sizeable chunk of the Hindu vote, even at the cost of unleashing a Hindu backlash and making a target out of the Sikhs.

At this plane, the Sikhs were substitutable victims, as were the Muslims in Hyderabad in September 1984 and the Muslims and the Dalits in Ahmedabad in April-May 1985. Only the organisers of such pogroms are not substitutable; they have to belong to the sector from which the Indian elites come; they have to take advantage of the State-controlled media and the State's law-and-order machinery.

It is not easy to organise a pogrom against a community not often seen as a minority. Despite efforts by Sikh zealots and despite the Sikhs being a crushing majority in the Punjab countryside, it was not possible to organise a single riot against the Hindus there during 1982-84. The Sikh zealots had to depend on a small band of assassins and they too ended up by killing more Sikhs than Hindus.

Likewise, it was not easy to induce the ordinary Hindu to attack the Sikhs in Delhi; in most cases one had to use imported gangs or the criminal underworld of Delhi, provide them with transport and weapons, and motivate them with the promise of loot, rape and protection. I like to believe that at one time, perhaps fifty or one hundred years ago, it must have been as difficult to organise a Hindu-Muslim riot. It is not easy to make a fanatic out of the ordinary believer, be he a Hindu, Muslim or Sikh.

Finally, while in all riots it is the poor who suffer the most, in 'secular riots' their lot becomes worse. Fanaticism cuts across social classes. A riot which is precipitated by a quarrel about playing music before a mosque, smoking before a gurudwara or by cow slaughter touches more different classes than does a riot which is fully organised.

In the latter case, the demand for secrecy, the fear of public protest, and the need to protect the rioting cadres from the hands of the law, and the need to destroy evidence of party or State involvement in the riots, force the organisers to choose dispensable victims who are less visible and have lesser access to the law courts and the media. Only the poor can meet these criteria.

In the Delhi carnage, available data suggest that less than two per cent of the Sikhs killed were well-to-do. The rest were poor or very poor. These poor Sikhs were mostly Congress-I supporters and in most cases they did not even speak Punjabi. A majority of them were Rajasthani Sikhs and they were hostile to the political demands of the Punjabi Sikhs. All this did not save them. Their poverty and their marginality doomed them. Secular communal violence, one suspects, is always more decisively anti-poor than the non-secular on.

To sum up, the Delhi carnage suggests that religious violence is becoming increasingly a product of hard political cost-calculations, level-headed organisation, and dispassionate arousal of communal feelings. It is now primarily a product of faulty rationality, not of faulty passions. The idea of secularism may be able to cope with religious riots which grow out of faulty passions but it is unable to cope with the riots which grow out of dispassionate, scientifically managed violence.

Given the contours of the existing ideology of secularism, instead of resisting such violence, secularism endorses the worldview from within which such violence flows. In practical terms, too, many secularists, when faced with State-sponsored communal violence, begin to collaborate with the sponsors because they see such collaboration as profitable. They can then justify the collaboration in terms of ornate theories which have little to do with immediate realities.

Recognising this new role of secularism is also to recognise that the major threats to religious tolerance now come from the modern sector in India. That is why the secularists have no answer when the minorities are attacked—or a base is laid for an attack on them—with reference to modern, secular criteria, when for example the Sikhs as a community are attacked for their links with external powers or for anti-national ideology, the Muslims for multiplying like bedbugs or the South Indians for not speaking Hindi.

Likewise, the Delhi carnage has made it clear that little help can be expected from the secularists when the State gets involved in organising communal violence. A few naive, good-hearted secularists may break ranks, but the remainder goose-step for whoever controls the State and the media and redefine cultural distinctiveness as antithetical to the interests of the State and, thus, as culpable.

Probably the thrust of the last part of the argument is that we can no longer define any sector, class or ideology as intrinsically incapable of producing communal violence. Each grouping or subculture has its own potential pathology which becomes patent once the group or the subculture establishes its hegemony in the society. It follows that neither a mechanical reiteration of the principle of secularism nor its mechanical exclusion from public life or public documents (such as the Constitution) will ensure religious tolerance in India.

To build a more tolerant society we shall have to defy the imperialism of categories of our times which allows the concept of secularism (which is but one out of many ways of moving towards a more tolerant society and a not very successful one at that) to hegemonise the idea of tolerance, so that any one who is not secular becomes definitionally intolerant. The defiance must involve attempts to recover the first-hand experience of religious and ethnic conflicts and cooperation from the ready-made interpretations of them given by the secularists.